

## Epiphany 5 (Ordinary time 2 (A))

Collect for Epiphany 5: O Lord, watch over your household with constant love: that, supported by you alone, we may always stand firm in your protection; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

**Isaiah 49.8-16a - This is what the Lord says: "In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'**

**"They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. <sup>11</sup> I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up. See, they will come from afar—some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan.<sup>[a]</sup>"**

**<sup>13</sup> Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."**

**"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.**

1 Corinthian 4.1-5 - This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. <sup>2</sup> Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. <sup>3</sup> I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Matt. 6.24-34 - "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life<sup>[a]</sup>?"

<sup>28</sup> "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. <sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Let us pray: Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of our hearts and give us correct faith, certain hope, and perfect love, so that we may always and in all things act according to Your Holy Will. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

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As we near the end of our journey through this season of Epiphany, and prepare to begin our journey through Lent, our readings give us opportunity to reflect once more on Jesus' identity, and what that means for us.

I'd like to focus mainly on our reading from the book of Isaiah this morning, if I may. Now, any of you who have read the book of Isaiah will know that it is a complex book with a number of themes. So, in order to help make best sense of the message of our reading from Ch. 49, let me give a quick back-story.

The book of Isaiah is best understood as a narrative of two halves: the first half takes in the first 39 chapters and incorporates three main themes: Judgement and hope for Jerusalem; judgement and hope for the nations; and the rise and fall of Jerusalem. The remainder of the book of Isaiah covers one predominant theme: Hope in the midst of, and amidst the prospect of, exile.

Let me put that in other words and with a bit of context. Isaiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah around 200 years or so after the death of Solomon and the dividing of the nation of Israel in two, with Judah to the south with its capital Jerusalem, and Israel to the north with its capital of Samaria.

In Isaiah's lifetime he spoke in warning of the impending judgements of God, in which God

would permit the hostility first of all from the nation of Assyria against the divided kingdom of Israel to the north, + the threat of hostility toward Judah as well; + then later from the nation of Babylon, which would succeed the Assyrian empire as the dominant power. It is the Assyrian conquest of Israel, + the threat of attack on Judah, that took place during Isaiah's lifetime that marks the dividing line between the two halves of Isaiah's prophetic writing.

So: in the first half Isaiah spoke of judgement tempered with hope for those who would repent and turn back to Yahweh God. In the second half Isaiah was speaking in the light of the judgement beginning to come to pass in the Assyrian conquest of Israel, + he focussed his message on the hope that was for all who would trust and turn to Yahweh God in the

midst of that judgement. So, with that backdrop, let's begin to unpack our reading today in the light of that theme of hopefulness in the second half of Isaiah's book.

Chapters 42-53 contain four 'Servant Songs'. In Isaiah's writing we see that the Servant is God's agent to do God's work in the world.

- The first song (42:1-4) tells of the call of the Servant to "*bring justice to the nations*".
- The second song, in vv1-6, just before our reading today, further defines the Servant's mission. The Servant is "*to raise up the tribes of Jacob + to restore the preserved of Israel*". More than that, God says, "*I will also give you for a light to the nations, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth*".
- The third song (50:4-9) doesn't use the word, "servant," but nevertheless describes

the work and tenacious faith of the Servant: God has given the Servant a tongue to teach and encourage the people; God has given the servant an ear both to hear God *and* to hear the people. While the Servant experiences violent opposition, yet his confidence is that “the Lord Yahweh will help me”, so the Servant sets his face like flint, fully confident that he will triumph over his adversaries.

- The fourth + arguably best-known of the servant–songs, which is the song of the Suffering Servant of Ch.53, tells of the Servant who suffers in the place of the people, redeeming them from their sins and their suffering. This Servant “was pierced for our transgressions”, and “by his wounds we are healed”.

Now, when Isaiah uses the word ‘servant’, it is probably best understood in the language

of the royal court, where the official of the king was known as his servant”. An official of this sort would exercise considerable power on the king’s authority. Think Moses, when Pharaoh appointed him the most powerful authority in Egypt under him. In like manner, in Isaiah’s usage, the servant speaks the words of Yahweh, and exercises considerable power on Yahweh’s authority.

I’m guessing the question you’re probably asking yourselves is: where is Tony going with this? What does this have to do with our journey through this season of Epiphany?

Well, remember what Epiphany means: it speaks of revelation, of something being made known.

And in our verses today, written in light of + in response to the 2nd song of the Servant, we see Covenant language. Now: a covenant is a binding agreement between two parties, outlining what is expected of both sides. Covenants between equals are typically *quid pro quo* agreements, where each party agrees to give something in exchange for something else—usually giving something equal in value to what they expect to receive. However, in Isaiah’s language it is clear he is not talking about this kind of covenant. He’s talking about a Covenant that **Yahweh God** is making. To the Hebrews, that is a big deal right there, living as they did in light of the Covenant God made with their forefather Abraham: they *defined* themselves as a Covenant people, yet Isaiah is talking here of a new Covenant. **That** kind of talk is the kind that sends tingles down the spine.

But more than that, did you notice how that sentence in v8b was written: “*and I will preserve you, and give you for a covenant of the people*”. Did you catch that? ...and-give-you-for-a-covenant-of-the-people? This conveys the sense that Yahweh will not only bless the people through *the work of the servant*: the Servant will also be the means *through which* this Covenant – this new Covenant - will be made. This is the first hint of what becomes clearer in the fourth song – the song of the suffering servant – that the Servant is the *sign*, the *means* + the *instrument* of the Covenant.

Are your spines tingling yet, at what is being made known – is being revealed of God’s plan – in the writings of Isaiah?

And what will be the fruit, the outcomes, the promises that will flow from this Covenant?

We know that Isaiah – who is the first of the major prophets God commissioned to speak to the southern nation of Judah - is speaking in the light of the Assyrian conquest of northern Israel, which involved the forced relocation + fragmentation of the Israelites within the wider Assyrian empire. And Isaiah could see the writing on the wall: he spoke also in anticipation of the future Babylonian conquest of southern Judah, which would involve the exile of the Judeans to Babylon.

And his words were words of hope + a bright future: yes, you will go into exile because of your stubbornness and waywardness – but in Yahweh God’s mercy + love your descendants will return home again, from the four points of the compass where they had been exiled to.

What does that say to us? Is there a message

for us here too? Who are the exiles for us to consider, whom we pray for to respond and to turn to God’s love? It is worth noting that there appears to be a growing hunger for the things of God among our young people across the UK, with many seeking to know more of the Christian faith. Whether that is something that grew out of their reaction + response to the *covid* pandemic or something else entirely, it is something to be aware of, as we consider how to make this community one of welcome + of nurture for all who seek to find God here in this place.

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His words were words of encouragement in Yahweh God’s provision and grace: although the journey home would be long for some, they would be sustained + nourished on the way: the roadsides would hold food, the hills

would hold pasture for their livestock, and streams of water would quench their thirst. Even the mountains – usually a barrier and a place of fear and threat - would not be an impediment, for Yahweh would transform them into paths to speed His people safely home once again.

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And the final words of the song? The words spoken over Mount Zion, upon which the city of David was built that was about to be laid waste, her temple devastated, + her people led away to captivity? The final words of the song are for her. And what more powerful analogy could Yahweh God give through Isaiah's words than the analogy of a mother and her infant? *"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast + have no compassion on the child she has borne? We know the answer is rare in light of the incredibly strong*

maternal instinct between mother + infant - yet rarely it does happen, and evokes strong response when it does. Yet God invites us to consider the unthinkable in order to make His point: *Though she may forget, I will not forget you!* And He goes further, with yet another reference to the Suffering Servant that we can see with the benefit of hindsight: *"See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands"; your walls are ever before me."* Jerusalem, the city of David and the home of the temple of the name of the Lord. Jerusalem, whose mighty walls would soon be rubbed in divine judgement + discipline through the onslaught of the Babylonians, yet rebuilt through God's grace, forgiveness + provision. Jerusalem, which Jesus lamented over, and outside whose walls the Messiah would be crucified. In this verse Yahweh God, speaking through Isaiah, reassures his people that their

disciplining + restoration are constantly before him + are constantly on his mind; that He has not forgotten the land or the home that He promised + gave them; and that He loves them + *longs for them to long for Him* - to respond to His love + care with undivided love for Him in turn. And when they do this, + live their best lives truly as He intended, His passion will be realised as the nations of the world will come to see + know His love + care through His people showcasing it through their lives.

That is the Epiphany the Israelites + Judeans had the time-and-time-again opportunity to live out, but failed to grasp.

But that is the Epiphany that we have been shown, + have been invited to respond to + generously share. May we each respond joyfully and wholeheartedly. Amen.